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Matt Grigsby and Peter Bramante: Brand helps Providence tell its story

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LOVE IT or loathe it, it's hard to ignore it. Providence's rollout of its new branding campaign "Providence: The Creative Capital" with its signature graphic orange P has certainly stirred up much controversy.

Some people have mocked the idea of giving a city a brand identity and catch phrase in the first place. Some have questioned the wisdom of spending the taxpayers' money on creating a brand, especially in these lean times. Some have criticized that a branding firm from Nashville was hired instead of a local firm. Some people simply don't like the orange P and some say it's not creative enough.

Well, we happen to love the Creative Capital branding and the big orange P. We believe it is very important to brand your city, to get it right and do it well, because creating a successful city brand means that you truly understand your city, you know its strengths, and you value what is great and distinct about it — and you are able to communicate all this to others in a few choice words and images, helping to attract them to your city, and making them feel good about visiting or living or doing business here.

We know that branding a city may sound hokey to some, but every place has a natural brand: It's the commonly felt impression of a place, its reputation; it's the things people say about it. When a city creates a brand for itself, what it is doing is telling its story. To flourish, cities need to attract and retain businesses, talented workers, institutions, students, tourists and other visitors. The city needs to tell its story far and wide, and also to itself, to attract and retain the people and organizations it desires as well maintaining a sense of spirit and purpose. So city leaders make efforts to present their city, using succinct and compelling words and images to capture the city's distinctive experience.

A successful brand isn't imposed upon the city; it is formed from real existing attributes discovered within the city. It has to be real, otherwise it doesn't ring true, and the promise will not live up to the experience.

Providence's branding research was a collaborative, comprehensive effort that brought together views and ideas from the Greater Providence Chamber of Commerce, the Providence Warwick Visitors and Convention Bureau, the Providence Tourism Council, the Providence Economic Development Partnership and hundreds of local business people, artists, elected officials, tourists and regular citizens. The branding research was an exploration to discover our city's identity in 2009. The Providence Tourism Council supported this effort by contributing more than \$100,000, which came from the hotel tax (paid by tourists, not residents).

The City of Providence chose an out-of-state firm to conduct the branding research because North Star Destination Strategies is a nationally recognized leader in place branding, and it proffered the lowest bid. We commend Mayor Cicilline and his team for hiring reputable experts and being prudent with our limited resources. It was also a smart move to hire outsiders who were able to see our city objectively and temper the local impressions with their own disinterested perspective. This is very important; as those closest to a brand typically need the input of those who can give honest, neutral feedback to ensure that self-interest does not over-influence the process.

And local talent in the form of Schwa Design and Pinpoint Studios took North Star's findings and built a marketing campaign focused around the creative assets of our city. Our existing creative assets such as AS220, Trinity, RISD, the Steel Yard, our unique entrepreneurial ventures and nationally recognized artists and inventors are being profiled in this campaign, as well they should. The city's "Buy Art" campaign was a spin-off, and soon a new Creative Capital Web site will launch with more stories of entrepreneurship and creativity.

Providence is a creative city! Rhode Island was founded on the principles of free thought and freedom of expression. Our state's colonial charter of 1663 enshrines the bold, creative thinking of our founder, Roger Williams: "To hold forth a lively experiment that a most flourishing civil state may stand and best be maintained with full liberty in religious concerns." A daring vision for its time, and one that has served us well all these years.

Providence has long been known as a beehive of industry and innovation. The city's role as the leader of a creative economy is not a recent catch phrase, but rather its legacy. The people of Providence have moved rivers, created renowned academic institutions, and made significant contributions throughout the world.

By selling our story, we can help attract people and businesses we want to come here. To accentuate our strengths and build our burgeoning business sectors — the creative sector, knowledge industries and social enterprises — we need creative minds to do this work, creative thinkers and creative leaders to help us out of this economic slump and into a better time.

To move into the future, we must let go of the past. We challenge people here to have a positive outlook on the branding campaign and realize that it is being implemented by a local design firm based on research that was conducted by an out-of-state consultant.

If you don't think Providence has been a haven for wildly successful, creative ventures, than think again. Family Guy, the Talking Heads, and Shepard Fairy's OBEY sticker campaign are just a few examples of creative things that sprouted in Providence. The size of Providence and its wealth of creative talent make it an ideal place for creative entrepreneurs and their ventures to flourish, and we are glad to see the city embracing this in its campaign.

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